



TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR LIFE

**The University of Akron's
Adolescent Substance Abuse Prevention Study**

***A Longitudinal Evaluation of the New Curricula for the D.A.R.E
Middle (7th Grade) and High School (9th Grade) Programs:***

TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR LIFE

Year Four Progress Report

January 2006



Information contact: Nancy Dudley at 202-368-2637 or DivineNWD@aol.com

The Adolescent Substance Abuse Prevention Study is funded
by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.



TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR LIFE

Year 4 Progress Report

Background

The University of Akron's Institute for Health and Social Policy, with a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the enthusiastic support of D.A.R.E. America, is now in its fifth year of evaluating a new program with curricula for middle (7th grade) and high school (9th grade) students called *TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR LIFE*. This landmark longitudinal prevention study is the first national research effort to blend the latest in prevention science with the nation's largest prevention delivery network -- D.A.R.E.-- which operates in 80% of all school districts and reaches millions of young people around the world each year. With 19,000 students in six cities being closely monitored from grades 7 through 11, the study of *TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR LIFE* is one of the largest prevention research efforts in size, scope, and sophistication.

The purpose of the Robert Wood Johnson funded study is to design and test the next generation of research-based school curricula for substance abuse prevention. The new *TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR LIFE* program, now being delivered by D.A.R.E. officers nationwide, is based on findings from twenty-five years of drug abuse prevention research and includes the three major elements of effective prevention:

- 1) Addressing misconceptions adolescents have regarding the normative nature of substance abuse among their peers;
- 2) Reinforcing the perceptions of harmful consequences of substance use; and
- 3) Providing the communication, decision-making, and refusal skills necessary to resist the use of substances.

The new, highly interactive programming also incorporates the most up-to-date evidence and research-based youth education strategies which involve the adolescents in the learning process via small group discussions and role-play sessions around real-life authentic substance-abuse scenarios.



TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR LIFE

Year 4 Progress Report

Testing in Six U.S. Cities

The *TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR LIFE* prevention program is being tested and evaluated for a large cohort of students (approximately 19,000) in six U.S. cities—Detroit, Houston, Los Angeles, New Orleans, Newark, and St. Louis. A total of 83 high schools and their 122 feeder middle schools (making up “school clusters”) from these six cities and their surrounding areas are participating in the study. Students from all environments-- urban, suburban, and rural-- are represented as are schools from both “high” and “low-stress” school districts. The “school clusters” were randomly assigned to either 1) receive the *TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR LIFE* program (the treatment condition) or 2) not receive the new program, but continue ongoing prevention activities (the control condition).

The two components of the new *TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR LIFE* program include a 10-lesson curriculum offered when the students are in the 7th grade and a 7-lesson booster curriculum offered when these same students are in the 9th grade. The curricula focus first on changing attitudes and beliefs of adolescents regarding substance abuse and eventually on preventing substance abuse behavior.

Students who receive the curricula in the 7th grade and again in the 9th grade are surveyed each year to learn about the impact of the curricula on: 1) their attitudes and understanding of the dangers of drug use and 2) their use of tobacco, alcohol, inhalants, marijuana, and other drugs. As of January 2006, the students were mid-way through the 11th grade, the final year in which they will be surveyed and monitored.



TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR LIFE

Year 4 Progress Report

Results to Date

The initial years of the study focused on determining whether *TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR LIFE* achieved the objectives of 1) addressing adolescents' normative beliefs and perceptions of consequences of substance use and 2) helping them to acquire communication, decision-making and resistance skills. Monitoring these "mediators" of *TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR LIFE* allowed the research staff to see if the program was doing what it was designed to do. Using complex modeling methods, the researchers have found that these mediators do, in fact, play an important role in explaining the use of tobacco and marijuana by adolescents. Of these mediators, results to date show that the *TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR LIFE* program has had the strongest impact on normative beliefs.

The University of Akron researchers have found that the TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR LIFE program is reaching adolescents who are at elevated risk for substance use. These are youngsters who, based on their reported involvement in problem behaviors when they were in the 7th grade, were considered at-risk to abuse tobacco, alcohol or marijuana. This finding will be examined further when the 11th grade surveys are completed.

In addition to examining the impact of the new curricula for D.A.R.E., the study also was interested in the degree to which the D.A.R.E. officers delivered the curricula as designed. **The findings suggest that D.A.R.E. officers are equal to and, compared to some studies, better than teachers in delivering TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR LIFE as designed.** Content coverage and delivery style were examined using independent observations. On average, officers delivered 76 percent of the content of the 7th grade component of *TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR LIFE* and 70 percent of the 9th grade component. The officers used the appropriate instructional method between 56 percent and 60 percent, respectively.



TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR LIFE

Year 4 Progress Report

Challenges

The study has faced a number of methodological challenges over the year. First, since the study began in 2001, overall national rates of youth drug use have been declining, which has made it difficult to determine whether changes in use are influenced by program participation or general trends in use. Second, many of the “control” schools, especially the middle schools, have implemented prevention programming with similar research foundations as *TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR LIFE*. In response, the University of Akron researchers are working to determine whether student exposure to similar prevention programming in the “control” schools might explain “comparable” levels of substance use among these students compared to those attending the “treatment” schools.

Finally, the study has been confronted with a natural challenge, Hurricane Katrina. In the fall of 2005, at the beginning of the study’s fifth and final year of data collection, fourteen New Orleans schools originally involved in the study were devastated by the Katrina tragedy. Three schools were unable to continue participation in the study. Now, in 2006, although the remaining 10 schools are open, it is not clear how many of the study students will be available to be surveyed.



TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR LIFE

Year 4 Progress Report

Looking Ahead

At this stage, researchers observe current evidence that the new *TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR LIFE* program is effective in reaching those adolescents who are at elevated risk for substance use. Furthermore, additional analyses may help D.A.R.E. to focus its 7th and 9th grade programming resources even more effectively to target those students for whom it is proven to work best. **The researchers are concluding that *TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR LIFE* works as well as any other effective school-based prevention program!**

Finally, as the related studies at the University of Akron (discussed in the “Results to Date” section) indicate, there is growing evidence of 1) increased receptivity of students to D.A.R.E. officers as the deliverers of prevention programming and 2) high fidelity with which D.A.R.E. officers deliver prevention programming. **All prevention programs being equal, it could be that the D.A.R.E. officer delivery system is the positive variable that will make the critical difference between one effective prevention program and another.**